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France cleared in bombing of ship

But government faces tough task of restoring tarnished image overseas

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Paris
The French government and its secret services were exonerated Monday in an investigation into the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior protest ship.

But that is unlikely to bring a quick end to an embarrassing affair that has filled summertime headlines here.

The Socialist government of President François Mitterrand appears to have weathered the crisis internally, analysts say, and it seems unlikely now that any official heads will roll. Overseas, however, France's image has been tarnished as details of one of its undercover operations have surfaced. The case has rekindled controversy about its nuclear tests in the South Pacific.

Furthermore, two French agents remain under arrest in New Zealand, charged with scuttling the ship in Auckland. And the biggest question of all remains unanswered: Who sank the Greenpeace protest ship, the Rainbow Warrior?

The report issued yesterday by Bernard Tricot, the man appointed to investigate the sinking, concludes largely what France's secret service, the DGSE, had been telling reporters all along.

Yes, said Mr. Tricot, France had sent agents to New Zealand to keep an eye on the antinuclear group, Greenpeace, and to find out what the protesters were planning for coming French nuclear tests in the Pacific atoll of Mururoa.

But no, the report concluded, neither Defense Minister Charles Hernu, nor intelligence officials, nor the agents themselves had anything to do with sinking the Rainbow Warrior.

The ship was sunk by a bomb on July 10, as it was preparing to sail for France's nuclear test zone. A photographer on board was killed.

Reports had reached the government, the Tricot report said, that Greenpeace was planning to send a large flotilla of small protest boats toward Mururoa during scheduled tests. It would be difficult and embarrassing for the French Navy to turn the boats back and the government wanted to know more.

But Tricot insisted that he had found neither evidence of implicit orders to stop Greenpeace's efforts by force, nor any indications that the simple instructions to gather intelligence were misinterpreted as they were passed down the line.

Tricot said that in his investigation he had considered the possibility that independent agents were responsible, or agents from another nation's intelligence service.

The bombers might have wanted to hurt Greenpeace or the might have wanted to hurt the French government, he said. Conceivably, they could have been targeting both Greenpeace and France, he said.

As for the French agents now under arrest for the bombing, Tricot said: "Given the evidence now be-

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fore me, I believe they are innocent."

Tricot said that he had had access to almost everything he wanted during the course of his 17-day investigation, including a great deal of the evidence that investigators in New Zealand have gathered against the two French agents.

That evidence certainly merits serious consideration, but it seems more of a troubling than a convincing nature, the report said.

In a television interview, shortly after the report was released, Tricot was clear and direct when asked who had sunk the Rainbow Warrior. "I have absolutely no idea," he said.

New Zealand's evidence is unlikely to emerge officially before November 4, when authorities there are scheduled to present their case in court. They have asked Tricot to keep their evidence secret.

Anything implicating the French agents could set the affair spinning once again. Until then, however, it will be up to President Mitterrand and Prime Minister Laurent Fabius to make the most of Tricot's favorable findings to repair the damage done by the case.

Mr. Fabius is scheduled to make his first public pronouncement on the subject today.

Since the government now appears blameless in the affair, analysts say, Fabius should suffer few political consequences. The more delicate task will be of rebuilding France's image abroad, and reasserting the nation's intention to conduct nuclear testing.

And despite Monday's report, doubts about France's involvement in the sinking are likely to persist overseas until the mystery is solved.